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## Thematic Teaching and Flexible Examination of German at University Level

### Abstract

We intend to carry out a pilot study in order to find out if a radical change of the current curriculum for the first and second semesters of German will decrease our present dropout and failure rates. Our project involves changing the general context, i.e. how and what is learned and how the learning is tested, in order to examine if student motivation and independence can be strengthened and present standards can be raised.

We will abandon all our parallel courses and instead focus on four successive thematic areas each semester. In these areas various modes of learning will be applied (lectures, seminars and group discussions, individual and group tasks, tutorials and computer aided learning) and the examinations following the themes will vary a great deal (options as to content and form).

In order to assess the effects of the changes the students' formal learning will be tested in the national German translation tests. The students' perception of language learning – its why, what and how – will be examined in oral and written interviews at the beginning and end of term, i.e. by identical interviews already undertaken with students following the current curriculum.

The project aims at

- finding models for thematic teaching: module content, scope, progression, and didactics, i.e. creating student tasks in a student attrition context that sets off both the individual work and group work, leading not only to an increase in the knowledge about German culture and language, but also to reflections on knowledge and learning itself,
- finding models for flexible examination: form, content, and progression
- testing the presupposition that the suggested changes will lower the drop-out and failure rates, strengthen student motivation, and deepen their learning.

The project involves four major steps:

- Setting up and testing the pilot courses for first semester students, autumn -98 and spring -99 ù Setting up and testing the pilot courses for second semester students, autumn -99 and spring 2000
- Evaluating and documenting the first semester courses, autumn -99
- Evaluating and documenting the second semester courses, autumn 2000.

The project participants – all of them from Gothenburg University – are:

Sigrid Dentler, project leader, lecturer at the Department of German and Dutch  
 Monica Haglund-Dragic, lecturer at and deputy head of the Department of German and Dutch

Christiane Pankow, lecturer at the Department of German and Dutch

Martin Todtenhaupt, lecturer at and head of the Department of German and Dutch

**Thematic Teaching and Flexible Examination of German  
at University Level**

Report on a pilot study of new learning environments for first-semester students

by

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this qualitative study of an educational project on new teaching and examination methods of German at university level is to describe in detail the data collection and the analyses made. There is also a brief explanation of the basic assumptions behind the project. These assumptions are partly related to educational theories about deep learning and problem based learning, partly to previous research.

The project was based on three research questions, formulated in an open way. It sought to discover if a curriculum based on thematic teaching combined with flexible methods of examination (as regards form, content, and progression), would promote not only student motivation but also improve standards of achievement.

In order to estimate the effects of the new first semester programme in an unbiased way its success is compared with similar data from a traditional first semester programme at the same department. These data comprise several questionnaires and two language tests. In the questionnaires, students were, among other things, about their motivation and in the language tests, their written proficiency was measured.

The comparison of data should not be seen as an attempt at verifying the success of the educational project in a strictly scientific sense. There are too many variables at play which limit the precision of the results. The most important variable is the rather restricted data collection from two student groups that are not exactly comparable. Furthermore, the outcome of the project might have been somewhat different had some of the attempted changes been more successful when put into practise. As regards written language proficiency, it also seems questionable whether results from a translation test are a valid measurement of written proficiency in German.

Nevertheless, the following is indicative of the project having achieved a certain degree of success: The answers given in the questionnaires indicate that the new learning environments created by the educational project indeed helped to strengthen student motivation. The comparison also shows that the dropout and failure rates were somewhat lower in the pilot group (ca. 5%). As regards the average results in a translation test, there are no differences between the groups.

Due to the character of the data analysed, the author is careful not to over interpret the results. Thus, it is shown that the two positive effects reported on could partly also be due to determinants lying outside the educational project. As for the generalisation of these research results, it is for the reader to decide whether they may be applied generally to new situations.

## **Object of this study**

This essay summarises the main results from an educational project funded by the Swedish Council for Renewal of Undergraduate Education 1998/1999. The project wanted to find out to what extent changes in the curriculum and methods of examination, promoting new ways of teaching and learning, can help decrease the drop-out and failure rates among students of foreign languages. The changes applied also sought to promote student motivation and standards achieved, i.e. help develop students who are trained in the process of inquiry, as well as helping them acquire language proficiency and factual knowledge. Reported are the outcomes of this project among first semester students of German at Göteborg University, spring semester 1999.

The project participants - all lecturers at the Department of German and Dutch, Göteborg University - were Sigrid Dentler (project leader), Monica Haglund-Dragic, Christiane Pankow, and Martin Todtenhaupt.

## **Purpose of the project**

The purpose of the project was to try out new models of teaching and examining in order to bring about improvements in the prevailing system. Taking some recent trends within pedagogy and Germanistik (“the teaching of the German language, literature and culture at university level”) as its starting point, we wanted to find out if a new learning environment based on a holistic form of teaching would lead to fewer drop-outs and failures, more motivated students, and more students than before achieving good standards as regards communicative competence in German.

In order to measure the success of our project we had, of course, to collect different data and compared them with something similar from the prevailing system. Thus, almost equivalent data were elicited from a student group following the traditional programme given in spring 1998. The two student groups sat for the same diagnostic proficiency test and were also given an identical questionnaire in Swedish during the first week of the course. A second questionnaire had to be answered during one of the last weeks of the semester. On this occasion the students were asked to evaluate their first semester of German studies. In addition, information from three sub-course evaluations by the pilot group was collected.

However, no such information was available from the control group, since their curriculum did not comprise thematic sub-courses.

The two groups also sat ~~for~~ the same kind of language proficiency test at the end of the semester: a national translation test for first-semester students of German (first half: German-Swedish, second half: Swedish-German, ca. 250 words in total). The grading of these results followed the same principles and was carried out according to nationally approved standards.

## **The students**

The students examined began their studies in the spring semester of 1998 (control group) and 1999 (pilot group). There were 54 students accepted in the control group and 70 in the pilot, most students in both groups being in their mid-twenties. As already mentioned, both groups sat for the same kind of diagnostic test at the beginning of the course, checking German grammar (theoretically and practically) and vocabulary. The average results, out of a maximum of 80 points, were 52,1 for the control group and 54 for the pilot group. These figures seem to indicate that the pilot group was slightly better. This might not have been the case, though, since the reliability of these average group results is somewhat limited due to the fact that 10 students from each group did not take part in this (non-obligatory) test. In addition, the groups compared are heterogeneous as regards their results in the diagnostic test, the pilot group comprising less average students (42% had 40 to 60 points), and more low and high achievers (19% had less than 40 points while 39% had more than 60 points). Equivalent figures for the control group are 60% (average), 10% (low) and 30% (high).

In addition to the diagnostic test most students answered a questionnaire where they were asked about their knowledge of languages other than German, their German grades (mostly from upper secondary school), length of prior visits/stays in German-speaking countries, occupation prior to their German studies, study goals, their understanding of what it means to know a foreign language well etc. Their responses show that the two groups shared many background features. A vast majority had, for example, left upper secondary school with good marks in German but only some 23% (control group 12 out of 54 and pilot group 17 out of 70) were planning to study German for more than one term. Further, only a minority (approx. one third) studied German as their first subject at university,

and only one third had earlier on stayed in a German speaking country for three months or more (a few au-pairs for 6 months to a year).

This overview indicates that it is possible to compare these two groups as regards average results in their German studies, bearing in mind, though, that the percentage of students with a low proficiency of German is twice as great in the pilot group at the beginning of the semester. On the other hand, a comparison of motivation seems possible since the students' prospective learning development and feeling of success will be evaluated against some commonly shared individual and academic background.

### **Assumptions about thematic teaching**

According to many researchers the choice of didactic alternatives and assessment methods have a strong influence on students' study strategies (cf. Evans 1988, Marton 1988, Mathias 1980, Svensson 1976). Some of these strategies, it has been argued, may help improve the quality of students' learning. Students usually activate such strategies if the content and context of their education imply a general setting that encourages quality before quantity in addition to independence and self-reliance in studying

One way to help improve the quality of learning, we assumed, was to substitute the present system (where the first semester full-time studies consist of a large number of parallel sub-courses) with a more structured system, based on a limited number of thematic sub-courses, where "fact based" teaching would serve as a starting point for individual and group centred work, promoting creativity, independence and a high degree of responsibility among the students.

### **Accomplishment**

Originally we had planned to organise the curriculum around three basic areas: Language, Culture, and Literature, each represented by one sub-course. At the end of the semester there would then follow a fourth, integrative sub-course. These plans were later reconsidered as all project participants felt that the content of the three first sub-courses was too conventional, creating a learning

environment which might stifle the creativity and engagement we sought to promote.

Thus, we offered three thematic sub-courses labelled *Westschweden und Schleswig-Holstein*, *Lebensstile in Schweden und den deutschsprachigen Ländern*, and *Kulturwelten: Die neuen und alten Bundesländer, die Schweiz und Österreich*. The concluding, integrative course, *Kolloquium: Kulturbegegnungen* comprised an individual project work, where each student had to study one subject area from any of the three preceding sub-courses in depth and hand in his or her investigation as a short paper (approx. 5 pp.). A visit to the nearby German town Kiel was also part of this last sub-course. Here our students took part in a joint seminar on intercultural differences with German students studying *Nordistik*, i.e. Scandinavian language, literature and culture.

The first three sub-courses centred around a close set of texts, video films and tape recordings which were prepared and discussed in class. During this work the study of German phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary was an integrative part. Subsequently, the students had to choose between a close set of tasks, solve them in groups/pairs/individually and hand in their written reports individually. At the beginning of the semester most reports had to be rewritten. The corrections seldom comprised only lexical and grammatical mistakes. Special attention was also given to content and text structure. Most tasks had also to be accounted for orally in their study group (comprising some 12-15 students).

In the first sub-course, for example, students had to work in pairs, arranging a one-week's stay for Germans visiting the town of Göteborg or West Sweden. As a stimulus they were given a set of German letters (from a variety of imaginary tourists asking for advice). According to their choice, one of these letters had to be answered in detail as regards hotel accommodation, sightseeing etc. Their individual task comprised a small essay in which a comparison was to be made between famous buildings, personalities, cultural festivities etc in West Sweden and its nearest German speaking community, Schleswig-Holstein. The students were encouraged to solve this task by using Internet as a source of information.

Parallel to the sub-courses the students had to read German literature (in all, six obligatory books). Each set of books had a common theme (i.e. *Jugendliteratur*, *Außenseitertum*) and was discussed in class from different perspectives.



As many first semester students have a poor knowledge of German grammar (both theoretically and practically) all our students were offered lectures in German grammar, running for three thirds of the semester. They were also encouraged to use computer based learning materials and to practice their German pronunciation in our modern language laboratory.

In order to introduce the students to research and to develop their critical thinking further lectures were offered almost every week. These lectures comprised subjects that thematically fitted into the sub-courses. Thus, in the first sub-course, there were e.g. introductory lectures on What is Germanistik? /What does it mean to study the German language, literature and culture/, Language Acquisition Research and German Influence on the Swedish Language from a Diachronic Perspective. In the third sub-course, lectures were given on Cultural Stereotypes, Modern Art in the German Speaking Countries and Modern Literature in Switzerland. All lectures included some tasks (i.e. questions related to the subject) that had to be accounted for in the seminars.

Finally there were tutorials each week where each study group (12-15 students divided into three base groups) had the opportunity to discuss different subjects with their individual tutor for two hours. Here we expected the students to ask for advice about how to get on with their essays/papers (language, structure, content) or about how to plan their work more efficiently. To our surprise, however, most students attending only wanted to discuss grammatical issues that they found hard to learn. All too late, unfortunately, we learned that those not attending were the ones who needed help as regards their planning.

All the lectures, seminars, and tutorials were given in German.

Needless to say, the new learning environments just described were far from successful in every respect. It is sufficient here to mention just some important problems:

- During the first weeks many students were somewhat disturbed by all the newfangled notions as the tutors did not realise that the students would need to be informed over and over again about the purpose of the changes;
- The subjects brought up in some lectures (e.g. on learning, culture and history) were not properly integrated with the seminars due to time limitations, non-co-operation of lecturers/teachers etc.;
- Some of the co-operation in the so called base groups failed as the tutors and teachers were not good enough at handling group dynamics;

- Some average and low achieving students with problems as to their learning did not bother about attending the tutorials.

The circumstances just described might have had some negative influence on the results to be described. There is no way of undoing these mistakes, of course. However, the project participants have learned what experienced researchers in educational sciences have known for a long time; ‘experiments ‘going wrong’ is a normal part of getting results’ (Nott & Smith 1995: 399).

### **The traditional method**

The above curriculum differs a lot from that followed by the students in the control group. Their first semester course was a traditional 20-credit course within the framework of university language studies in Sweden. It consisted of 7 parallel courses, concluded by oral or (mostly) written exams:

- grammar, 8 credits (two subsequent courses - lectures and seminars - running for the whole term, starting with general grammar and German morphology, 3 credits, followed by German syntax, 3 credits, and vocabulary, 2 credits - two written exams);
- modern German literature, 3 credits (lectures and seminars on six obligatory books comprising 800 pp.) The students have to read three books intensively, learn all the vocabulary and then write three summaries. In the final oral exam the remaining five books have to be accounted for;
- civilisation, 2 credits (lectures on the geography, history and social sciences of the German speaking countries, one obligatory textbook, read intensively, and 10 issues of German speaking papers/ magazines, read extensively - final written exam);
- oral proficiency, 4 credits ( 2-credit course in phonetics and German pronunciation, written exam, and another 2-credit course in oral proficiency/conversation);
- translation (3-credit course running for the whole semester comprising seminars where the focus is on the translation of short Swedish texts into German - final written exam).

Approximately half of the courses were given in German.

## **Traditional versus flexible examination**

As already pointed out, the traditional curriculum comprises many different sub-courses that are concluded by written exams throughout the semester. These exams, in all five, contain tasks on factual knowledge, solely chosen by the teachers, and tasks checking German language proficiency. The three obligatory summaries on German literature, written out of class, also function as a kind of exam as they pass or fail depending on grammatical correctness. Contrary to the five exams written in class, even grammatically poor summaries usually pass after the first rewriting. In order to continue to the next level of German studies, at least 15 out of 20 credits have to be attained during the first semester.

There are two oral exams: one obligatory 10 minute presentation in front of class in the conversation course and one final, more extensive exam where five obligatory books from the 2-credit course in German literature are accounted for individually. The presentation in the conversation course is the only part of any of the examinations in which the student can choose the subject to dealt with

The exam in translation (into German) counts as the heaviest part of the programme since approximately 60 - 70% of the candidates fail on the first attempt. Thus, at the end of spring term 1998, 35 students out of the 51 taking an active part in the programme, failed the exam, and 16 passed. Later, another 12 students passed when they sat the translation test for the second time, at the beginning of autumn 1998.

Contrary to these traditional, mostly written individual tests/exams on subjects/tasks almost exclusively chosen by the teachers, the students in the pilot programme took part in flexible examinations as regards form, content, and progression. Behind this experiment were several assumptions, the most important ones being:

- If students can accomplish exams not just individually and preferably in written form but also in groups and orally their motivation to succeed will become stronger and their fear of failing less;
- If students can more freely choose their own content when tested, they will be encouraged to develop a stronger sense of self-responsibility and critical and independent thinking which may lead to their learning and performing better;
- If students get used to taking part in oral and written tasks, where the difference between obligatory task and examination is somewhat blurred,

they will more easily understand language learning as a slowly developing process where the *ultimate* success is measured by the individual, learning more and better, and not by his passing certain exams.

These assumptions were put to practice in the following ways:

- most vocabulary tests comprised an individually chosen quota;
- oral examinations comprised individually chosen or group based subjects out of a given range of subjects to choose from;
- the students were always confronted with subjects which involved problem-solving i.e. comparing facts and drawing conclusions;
- the number of oral tasks was increased;
- the students were encouraged to solve many oral and some written tasks in groups;
- the students had to take part in a series of obligatory written tests on grammar and translation which served as pre-tests for the final tests, which had to be passed;
- the students had to account for their learning in each of the four modules, orally as well as in writing, the task performances counting as equally important, Poor performances counted as failed and had to be repeated until the standards expected were achieved.

Taking an active and successful part in the four modules rendered 5 credits each. An active engagement but somewhat faulty standards in the first module rendered five credits automatically whereas the three proceeding modules demanded good standards as regards both content and form to count as passed. The overall performance on the whole course was graded *failed*, *passed* or *very good*-according to the average performances in the last three modules.

## Dropout rate

In both groups a couple of students dropped out of the course during the first weeks: 3 from the control group and 5 from the pilot group. A few of them probably left because they realised that they did not have a sufficient knowledge of German to follow the programme. For two students in the pilot group there must have been

other reasons since they attained somewhat above average results in the diagnostic test (57 and 67 out of 80 points). A good guess is that these had the opportunity to switch to another university programme, i.e. a programme that they already initially preferred to the German one.

In addition to these students just mentioned there were quite a number who followed most parts of the programme but still left with less than the expected 20 credits, 24 out of 51 in the control group, and 27 out of 65 in the pilot group. This comparison points to these drop-outs being somewhat less in the pilot group, i.e. 41,5% compared to 47,1% in the control group. The credits attained by those not finishing the first semester course were also higher among the pilot students: 19 out of 27 left with 15 credits compared to only 6 out of 23 in the control group. There were also far more students in the control group who did less well: 7 left with less than 10 credits compared to 1 student in the pilot group.

It could be argued, of course, that this comparison is not quite fair since the credits achieved are not quite comparable and since all students joining the pilot programme gained their first 5 credits more or less automatically, just by taking part in the first thematic sub-course. As regards the effort and work the two student groups had to perform in order to achieve course credits, the credits are well comparable; the standards of factual knowledge and language proficiency were up to the same standards of our traditional programme. In addition, the comparison seems quite fair since 2 to 4 credits in the traditional programme also come more or less automatically (i.e. credits for pronunciation and taking part in the conversation course). Thus, the level of achievement in the pilot programme seems beyond question.

This level of achievement is far from impressive, though, considering the fact that the average share of dropouts just discussed has been somewhat between 45% and 50% for quite a number of semesters. Generally speaking, there must be many reasons for such a great percentage of students not attaining all 20 credits (within the first semester or soon afterwards). No doubt, their insufficiently good pre-knowledge of German plays a great role. This can also be concluded from the results of the initial diagnostic proficiency test, given at our department for many semesters: normally, students with a low achievement in this test attain less course credits than students with average or high achievements.

Thus, in the two groups examined two-thirds of the respective dropouts had results below 50 points (80 is the maximum). However, one third of the successful ones in the control group and one fifth in the pilot group also attained similar low results but, contrary to these “bad odds”, still managed to finish the first semester programme. Hence there must be other determinants, often interacting with insufficient pre-knowledge among the dropouts. As for the 23 dropouts in the pilot project, some 10 to 12 seemed to have had sufficient knowledge of German to finish the programme. According to the tutors these students failed because they did not work hard enough: 4 to 5 because they did not really care about finishing the whole programme and some 7 because they had problems with planning their studies. A good guess is that those 7 could have been turned into “successful” students, had they only been given sufficient support with their planning right at the start of the semester. Unfortunately, they did not get as much help as they needed, the reason being that they asked for it too late or not at all. It seems fair to conclude, however, that the number of drop-outs can be reduced in the future if students with initially just below average knowledge of German basics will be given extra attention and help in how to plan their work.

The comparison between the control group and the pilot group shows that the project managed to reduce the number of dropouts somewhat. It also managed to create a learning environment that encouraged more students than normally to take an active part in the programme for a longer time, even though these students did not reach the maximum 20 credits. From the perspective of learning German for future use this seems far more promising than, for example, quitting half way. On the other hand, unfinished courses are of little value for a university system like the Swedish one, where not only success but also financial support from the state (to students and departments) is heavily linked with students attaining a certain number of credits each semester.

### **Students’ study goals**

In the initial questionnaire both student groups were asked to define their study goals and to explain their concept of learning German at university level (in Swedish). At the end of the semester they were again asked similar questions. The analyses of these answers show very similar results with Enkvist’s study of first semester students

of Spanish. Enkvist concludes, “These students do not change their conceptions of what it is to know a language well or what they want to learn during the semester. They stick to their original views and are not influenced by the university’s way of understanding language learning” (1992:8).

As to study goals there are hardly any differences between the two German groups examined, i.e. what our first semester students estimate as the most important when studying a foreign language like German. Their goal number one is - with just a few exceptions - acquiring oral fluency. Second comes written proficiency, and third listening and reading comprehension. Last but one comes knowledge of German literature, followed by knowledge of culture and politics. Only a few students also mention as a goal: to learn stylistic variation, to understand jokes and irony, and to use the language creatively. From similar results in her study Enkvist (1992:9) draws the conclusion that quantity dominates quality. To learn more grammar and a larger vocabulary, and to be able to make oneself fairly correctly understood orally seems far more important than acquiring a high degree of correctness (written or oral), and being able to use what you already know in different contexts.

It did not come as a surprise that the vast majority of first semester students of German initially states that, most of all, they want to be able to speak the language fluently. Taking into account that most of them also claim that they want German for instrumental reasons, i.e. for pecuniary-professional aims like getting a good job abroad as an engineer, a lawyer, and so forth, this seems rather natural. Their answers to this question remain the same at the end of the semester. This could also be expected. Students learning foreign languages for instrumental reasons will probably always start studying a language for strictly practical reasons because language proficiency, and especially a good command of oral communication, plays a very important role in most professional contexts. Only later, after perhaps two or more semesters of study, will they be ready to understand that good communicative competence in a broad sense comprises good knowledge of literature, culture, and so forth, beside a good level of correctness.

Obviously, listening and reading comprehension are rated lower than oral proficiency in our German questionnaire, the reason being that these perceptive proficiencies are already attained in most cases, Swedish and German being closely related. A far smaller amount of German students - as opposed to the Spanish ones in Enkvist -

seems to belong to the category of so-called integrative learners. Such learners study a foreign language at university because they love languages, literature and foreign cultures. There are hardly any students of this kind in any of the two groups examined. This seems to be due to the fact that German is a low prestige language in Sweden compared to English, French or Spanish. Thus, very few study German because it is popular (like English), or because they admire most things connected with German speaking countries, as is often the case with many students of French or Spanish. Accordingly, more so called technical learners ought to be found among students of German, i.e. learners who only want to focus on oral or written fluency while wanting to do away with the study of literature, culture, and the like. A comparison with Enkvist seems to confirm this expectation. In her study there are no such Spanish learners (1992: 9), in our German groups examined, there are a few of them in each group.

According to previous research, instrumental learners are as good foreign language learners as integrative ones. It could be the case, though, that many instrumental learners, and not just the utterly instrumental sub-type “technical learners”, have problems with adapting themselves to the broad goals of many foreign language departments in Sweden. These goal fulfilments include, as we all know, knowledge and skills in the language chosen, development of student’s judgement, critical thinking etc., and research orientation. The tendency among many Swedish students of German to see the skill training alone as the only sensible goal, even in the second and sometimes in the third semester, could be due to their strongly instrumental perspectives, which in turn seems to be closely connected with the low status of German in present day Sweden.

### **Students’ concepts of learning**

The project also aimed at influencing the students’ conception of learning - in accordance with the idea that modern language departments should help develop not just fact-oriented students but also inquisitive and independent learners. Following Enkvist 1992:7, the students were asked to describe what it means to know a language like German well, both at the beginning and end of the semester (i.e. in both questionnaires). Not surprising, there were strong parallels in both groups between their study goals and the answers to this question. For example, students with oral



fluency as their main goal ~~e.g.~~ defined good knowledge of a foreign language as oral proficiency, and those who wanted to learn more about the literature explained this knowledge in terms of using the language creatively etc (cf. Enkvist 1992:19 for similar results, the analyses by Enkvist going into great depth, though). Most answers to this question expressed, in accordance with Enkvist's results, "rather limited and traditional views on the subject, highlighting only a few aspects" (Enkvist 1992: 16).

At first sight this seems to indicate that neither traditional methods, nor the learning and examination methods used in our project, are able to influence the students' conceptions of learning during the first semester. Thus it seemed that neither our initial lectures and discussions on language acquisition research, meta-cognitive awareness, language variation etc., nor the new teaching and examination methods used, did bring the students in the pilot group to give different answers to this question compared to the control group.

There is one problem with this conclusion, though: can the various answers to this question be equated with different conceptions of learning? The issue being, of course, in what way certain "conceptions of what it is to know a language" (cf. Enkvist above) are related to different conceptions of *learning* a language. In my view, this connection is far from being a direct one, i.e. answers as regards knowing a language well do but very indirectly convey assumptions about what it means to learn a language at university level - the difference being that of describing a process and of describing the end-results of the very same process.

Thus, the answers to two further questions in the last questionnaire seemed far more appropriate to examine. The first question addressed the issue of what qualities successful students of German should have, i.e. what qualities promote learning (*Vilka egenskaper tycker du man bör ha för att klara av A-kursen bra i dess nuvarande utformning?*). The answers in the two groups examined showed remarkable differences. In the control group the answers focus on qualities associated with language proficiency: having visited German speaking countries (11 answers) and having a good grip of the grammatical basics (9 answers). Many students also list self-discipline (7 answers) and good motivation (11 answers) as important qualities, i.e. as good qualities when preparing for tests/exams. In all, 34 students in the control group answered this question

Contrary to this pattern, a great many students in the pilot group list qualities such as curiosity, inquisitiveness, and engagement equally as important as good knowledge of grammatical basics (out of 42 students, 16 answered these two questions in this way). Many also mention self-discipline (13 answers) but in contrast to the control group this quality is seen as necessary when organising and taking responsibility for the individual learning. No doubt, these answers indicate that the pilot students have a different concept of learning a foreign language at university level. The control group, thus, considers acquiring good language proficiency and the ability to prepare for exams to lie at the very heart of their studies. The pilot group, besides focusing on language proficiency, also stresses the student's own responsibility and different ways of attaining knowledge/proficiency. Most probably, this view was not there from the start of the semester but came about slowly, due to the content of the curriculum and to the teaching and examination methods applied.

In the second question, somewhat more indirectly connected with concepts of learning, the students were asked if they felt satisfied/dissatisfied with their overall study results and, if dissatisfied, to explain the reason for this (*Har du lärt dig vad du hoppades under denna termins studier i tyska? Om nej, motivera!*). A majority in the two groups stated that they were satisfied but their individual answers differed in ways that also seems to indicate the above-mentioned differences.

Thus, in the control group the positive answers (in all 25) mainly comprised comments like “yes, I *probably* am”. Some students also went on to explain why they have this feeling: “I’m quite content since I’ve passed all the exams” or “yes, I feel satisfaction because I have attained the credits I planned to take”. Again a picture emerges of students unaware of and not used to evaluating their learning and its success on their own. The negative answers (in all 7) confirm this interpretation. Except for one answer, there are no comments saying that the student in question has lacked the responsibility, diligence and motivation necessary for success. The critique lies solely with the language department (not having offered enough oral proficiency training or having set the wrong standards etc.).

In accordance with the control group, the majority of answers in the pilot group are clearly positive, i.e. 34 out of 47 answers. Many more, though, comment on their satisfaction. Only four students give as a reason that they have passed the exams. The great majority, however, relates their satisfaction to personal aspirations, stating that

they have learnt to speak and write more fluently which they see as their main goals in their studies of German. Quite a few also add comments like ‘I could have done better, though, had I worked harder’. Two students write that their satisfaction is due to doing their best, which in turn has led to their gaining more knowledge about the German language. Also, the critique in 12 of the 13 negative answers is placed solely on the student's own shoulders. These comments comprise explanations of the following three types: ‘I haven’t worked enough’(5); ‘I had higher expectations of myself’ (4); and ‘I was unable to understand/acquire what was offered’(3). Only one student comments that his dissatisfaction is due to not passing all the exams. Once again the picture of students relating successful learning to their own aspirations and efforts emerges.

Summing up it seems that the students’ goals for their German studies are the same in both groups. This goal, being strongly connected with acquiring oral and written proficiency, does not change during the first semester of studies. Their somewhat different conceptions of learning are closely connected to this common goal, of course, differing principally when it comes to the question of how to reach this goal. The control group stresses prior knowledge of grammatical basics and personal experiences such as visits abroad. They also understand self-discipline as a prerequisite for successful preparations for exams, and measure their success in accordance with the standards set up by the language department. In accordance with this, they also seek to find the reasons for their failure within the department. The pilot group, on the other hand, besides stressing prior grammatical knowledge, focuses on personal qualities such as inquisitiveness and engagement when learning German successfully. Self-discipline is not seen as a tool for successful exams but rather for successful learning where the responsibility lies within the student. In accordance with this view, these students also measure their failure or success in relation, not to their passing or failing to pass the exams, but in relation to their aspirations and to the individual efforts and work performed.

### **The pilot group’s evaluation of the sub-courses**

Fifty students in the pilot group also filled in questionnaires on all three sub-courses. Here they were asked to comment on the different modes of teaching and learning (lectures, class, tutorials, and group work) and, according to a graded scale, to assess

the time spent on German studies and its success. According to these questionnaires the pilot programme was very well received. Their evaluations were very positive and many students reported an increasing time studying German. The great majority also stated that they very happy with the results achieved. These student evaluations can be summarised as follows:

Comments on class work, lectures, tutorials and group work, and examinations show that approximately 40 out of 50 students are extremely positive, five are somewhat hesitant and another five negative. There is no instance where one single student is negative towards more than one mode of teaching/learning. These figures change somewhat towards the end of the semester when quite a few of the hesitant answers become positive ones, though the hard core of the five negative students remains constant. When asked to comment on especially positive and negative features one third, and later on, one half praises group work as very rewarding. Students with a rather negative attitude on the other hand, tend to criticise the lack of structure, traditional grammar exercises and traditional tests.

The students were also asked to comment on how many hours a week they spend on learning German: at the outset of the semester only 20 students out of 50 estimated that they spent 40 hours a week on their German studies, 8 far more time and 22 less time. Equivalent calculations at the second and third time of evaluation show that an increasing number of students spent 40 hours on their studies (33, and later, 37), whereby the number of lazy/unmotivated students dropped from 22 to 8 (and finally 6). Given the case that there is a strong connection between time spent studying and motivation (i.e. more time implies stronger motivation), the learning environments in spring semester 1999 thus seem to have had a positive influence on student motivation: they helped strengthen their motivation as the semester went by.

Motivation is often seen to go hand in hand with learning: motivation leads to learning and success in learning creates motivation. The three sub-course evaluations seem to confirm this assumption. When asked to assess if they had learnt

- just a little
- a fair amount
- a great deal

a small number of dissatisfied learners (learning *just a little*) remained rather constant (8, 9 and 6), The amount of very successful learners ( learning *a great deal*), however, increased (from 4 to 8 to 12). It goes without saying that the great majority of the students were satisfied with what had been achieved (38, 33 and 32 - learning *a fair amount*). These figures fit well with the information on study time. Most students spend quite a lot of time on their German studies and are satisfied with their results. As for the small number spending very much or very little time, the time determinant does not seem to co-vary with the feeling of satisfaction: independent of time spent studying there are both satisfied and dissatisfied learners. This does not come as a surprise, of course. Most teachers have, for example, met with the ‘‘lazy’’ learner, who always seeks to blame all his failures on the learning environments, or - to take the other extreme - who does away with failures by transforming them into successful mini-results.

Since there are no similar data available from the traditional programme, it would, of course, be too hasty to conclude that these positive trends are unique to our pilot project. It might be the case that most (Swedish) students of foreign languages at university level, independent of teaching and examinations methods used, take part in a similar process.

### **The translation test**

The two groups examined also sat for the same kind of language proficiency test at the end of the semester: a national translation test for first-semester students of German at Swedish universities. Its level of difficulty is approximately the same each semester. The test always comprises two small texts, all together about 250 words, one of which has to be translated from German into Swedish, and one the other way round. The results are graded Very good, Passed and Failed according to a list of correction advice (so called minus and plus points), set up nationally. By comparing the results achieved in these translations we wanted to find out if the language proficiency standards achieved in our new learning environment would be up to - or even better than - the standards of the traditional programmes.

The comparison based on test results from spring 1998 and 1999 points to the standards being about the same. In the so called traditional group 16 out of those 51 students taking a more or less active part in the programme managed to pass the test at the end of the semester. The equivalent figures for the pilot group were 21 out of 65. This means that about one third of the students in each group passed the test, the pilot students leading with just one percent. Obviously, this small lead is not a sign of better standards achieved. On the contrary, the traditional group could be regarded as having been more successful, taking into account that there were more students in this group who achieved Very good (9 in comparison with only 6 in the pilot group). On the other hand, the results for the pilot group would probably have been better, had the test been of greater importance to them. Test results, as noted by many researchers, normally become better if those tested know that their results are somehow important. As already mentioned, only the traditional students had to sit for this test in order to pass the whole course. Thus, taking both the results and the non-linguistic determinant of the test situation into account it seems as if the pilot group, despite their having to do contrastive comparisons like translation work all on their own, managed as well, on average, as the control group.

Summing up then, our project did not help the students to achieve better results in a translation test. However, their attaining approximately just as good results can be seen as partly a success, considering they had no training in translation. Hence, a majority of the reports handed in at the end of term show that most students not only have good knowledge of grammatical basics in German, and that they master the central vocabulary (of some 5 - 7 000 items) well, but also that they are able to produce written discourse in German with fairly good standards as to information structure, cohesion and coherence.

The whole idea of using a translation test as a comparable measure of written proficiency in a broad sense is, of course, begging the question. Are not variables such as information structure, cohesion and coherence, beside traditional variables such as morpho-syntactic correctness at sentence level, just as important when it comes to measuring written proficiency? Had there been a comparable test in accordance with these variables as well, the pilot group, no doubt, would have scored far better. Such results would not have come as a surprise, though, taking into account that only the pilot group, over and over again, was trained to produce written

discourse. There were, however, no comparable data available from to this kind of written proficiency test.

## **Concluding discussion**

The aim of this study of a first semester educational project was to describe in some detail the changes introduced, and to discuss the analyses made from the data collected, in trying to measure its success. Our project wanted to find out if practising speaking, reading and writing in four thematic modules centring around a systematic comparison between the Swedish and German speaking cultures, would lead to better results when compared to a more traditional first semester programme. The difference was to be measure by the rate of dropouts, the quality of student motivation and the standards achieved in a translation test. The analyses point to the educational project being partly a success. The number of dropouts was reduced, although by only some 5%, and far more students seem to have had a stronger motivation for studying German. The level of written proficiency in German, though, as measured by the traditional translation test, seems to have remained the same.

Evidently, the educational project, its accomplishment and evaluation are closely linked to the ongoing discussion about the quality of teaching at university level. What is quality in a university language programme? How is quality attainable and how can it be measured?

As already discussed by others (e.g. Bartning 1993:2), if quality means the level of goal fulfilment, than the central issue is *who* decides *what* goals there are for university language programmes. Quite a few studies indicate that most Swedish students, their future employers and the general taxpayer share a similar notion about the goal for foreign language studies. Most important is the acquisition of oral proficiency, followed by written proficiency and, possibly, some broad cultural knowledge (Enkvist 1991:19 ff.). Contrary to this, the university itself requires far more. Besides proficiency skills and factual knowledge every programme should help to develop the students' judgement, critical thinking and independent problem-solving ability - and help to unfold the ability to follow research within the language area. It is a well-known fact that many modern language departments pay lip-service to these (the university's) goals in the first semester because, the modern language

departments feel that the university authorities have no inkling about the low proficiency standards of students entering the programmes. In the opinion of the language departments, only a few of these goals are attainable in a first semester programme, namely providing the student with some factual knowledge about the language itself and its literature and history, and some written skills as to contrastive differences in morphology and syntax.

The educational project described in this paper should be seen as a means of attaining a wider goal fulfilment. By combining proficiency training, oral as well as written, with problem oriented tasks on a close set of themes, and by linking these themes with research oriented lectures, it attempted to reach this wider goal of good communicative competence, research orientation, and the development of a critical and independent mind.

When putting the project into practice during the spring semester 1999, the project participants learned that some parts of this wide goal are very difficult to reach within the economical framework set for mid-size foreign language departments in Sweden. The workload for the four project participants and the German language lecturer was far too heavy, involving as it did the designing, supervision and evaluation of the whole array of different tasks for some 60 students. Because of this we had the feeling that the research orientation was not strong enough. There were also times when student feedback was faulty and when some of the group-based work dissolved into individual work. Also, some of the tasks assigned were less appropriate. They demanded too much time for collecting factual information, which often meant that the critical account of this information became poor. We also felt that we did not manage to provide a creative study atmosphere at our department because there were neither space nor means enough (read: group rooms to work and discuss in, and access to new media such as computer-based resources such as Internet).

The too heavy workload meant that the educational project, when continuing in the autumn semester 1999, was slightly altered. The thematic modules, for example, became somewhat more traditional (i.e. Language, Literature and Culture) with a closed set of tasks linked with each module. In this way less time had to be spent on designing and supervising tasks. The four tutors still supervised all the examinations in their different study groups but the time for tutorials was reduced to one hour every week. The second semester, following the new programme in the first semester, was



also changed, one important reason being that those pilot students deciding to continue their German studies did not want to work and learn in the traditional way. Suffice it to say that these alterations have been smaller than originally planned. Again, economical factors played the most important role in limiting the alterations. Also, some teachers and lecturers were extremely reluctant to adapt to an almost completely revised curriculum.

Last but not least, one question remains to be discussed: taking into account all the difficulties in trying to fulfil the wide goal described above, are there other, better or less biased ways of measuring the quality of goal fulfilment attempted? Naturally, one would hope that there would be a whole array of excellent methods described in the literature on educational sciences, which, when put to practice, would yield unambiguous results with a high degree of generalisation. Unfortunately, this seems not to be the case. This is true not only for measuring such difficult qualities as motivation or critical thinking, but also for far less complicated ones such as that of achieving good standards in written proficiency. Research in quality seems to comprise the analyses of data, too often not strictly comparable since the data themselves are due to far too many variables (linguistic, as well as non-linguistic), only a small number of which can be controlled. One possible way of attaining a high degree of generalisation is, of course, by measuring quality with several alternative theoretical and methodological approaches. This approach could not be chosen here. Instead the value of the results achieved should be measured by argumentative generalisation of the analyses. In other words, when interpreting the data I always attempted to link the interpretations with some theory-guided basic assumptions. Additionally, I aimed at presenting my interpretation in a conclusive logical flow, always accounting for alternative interpretations.

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